

God Term and Devil Term Paradox: Discovering Artifact Meaning through the Deadpool Term

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Kenneth Burke's ideas about god terms and devil terms are important to artifacts because they help audiences determine opposing meaning found through the identification of opposing terms. Identifying god terms and devil terms within artifacts gives insight into rhetor motive and message intention. In order to build upon audience comprehension of god terms and devil terms, anti-hero characteristics will be used to suggest an additional labeling of the "Deadpool Term." The Deadpool Term is an entry point for understanding that a term in an artifact, at the point it is used, can include both god term and devil term dichotomy, which would then mean that opposing meaning can actually—and quite purposefully—be found within the term. Identifying a Deadpool Term can additionally help the audience discover an important rhetorical strategy; the rhetor intends to show extremes of meaning, as well as conflicted feelings, by way of intentionally chosen symbolic language.

Keywords: Kenneth Burke, god term, devil term, anti-hero, Deadpool Term

Introduction

In an effort to further explore, reconsider, and revitalize our understanding of Kenneth Burke and rhetoric, we are suggesting that audiences look to the rising cultural popularity of anti-heroes as the foundation for a theoretical framework of the symbolic use of language. The unpredictable, gray area that anti-heroes inhabit can make them more relatable to audiences; their emerging importance is notable since they can run the range of extremes of good and evil. Using Burke's (1966) notion that "language has its own particular motives" (p. 440) and Brummett's (1989) idea that "some vocabularies take [a key symbol] to be a Devil term and others a God term" and therefore "intractable conflict and controversy may arise around that symbol" (p. 88) as frameworks, the goal in this paper is to establish examples of terms that can also run the range of good and evil, therefore introducing the "Deadpool Term." Named after Marvel/Disney's Deadpool, the Deadpool Term will serve as a means of grasping a symbol by utilizing Burke's research while also expanding on his ideas. Deadpool Terms can be used to understand otherwise seemingly paradoxical language within persuasion, thereby offering a new framework through which rhetorical meaning in persuasive acts can be derived. Ultimately, the Deadpool Term is an alternative framework for understanding words and phrases and the ways in which those words and phrases connect with audiences.

Burke has a clear indication of god terms and devil terms within artifacts; 'artifacts,' in this case, referring largely to human-made, culturally-bound texts. Conceptually, artifacts "can be inductively analyzed by indexing key terms and their associations, a technique [Burke] calls 'cluster analysis' by which a complex concordance is assembled to aid interpretation" (Thames, 2021). The key term labels of 'god term' and 'devil term' and what they represent are shaped from a theological foundation. For Burke (1989), the labels of god terms and devil terms are derived from "the devil being the dialectical counterpart of God" (p. 171), since the terms are meant to be dialectical counterparts of each other. The prevailing notion is there is a "leading in the secular realm towards an over-all title of titles. Such a secular summarizing term would be technically a 'god-term'" (Burke, 1970, p. 25). For the rhetor, "the term god, as well as the term devil," are representations, respectively, of "things which are deemed good

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and right, as well as things which are to be judged evil and wrong” (Slater, 2018, p. 102). Likened in a way to a god, the god term symbolizes an ultimate good, while the devil term symbolizes an ultimate evil.

Since the words run in extreme directions, they are meant to provide crucial insight into rhetor worldview. This is because, as expressed by Brummett (1989), god terms and devil terms “essentialize...good or evil motives” (p. 86). The key terms are therefore bound to the rhetor’s motive, internalized within the artifact, more than they are bound to an existing, external cultural construct. This is partially how “conflict and controversy” found “around [a] symbol” (Brummett, 1989, p. 88) due to subjective interpretation might be mitigated. The rhetor’s motive is meant to be revealed through term use within the particular artifact, with as comprehensive and complete of an understanding as possible. Specifically, “the good rhetorician leads those who listen in the direction of what is good” (Weaver, 1985, p. 18). Accordingly, the terms are judged and interpreted by the audience based on what appears to be intended on the part of the rhetor within a given artifact, something Burke (1984) depicted as “our word for the motive characterizes the situation” (p. 221). For example, ‘love’ is a term that may be viewed culturally as an extreme positive, but it does not automatically follow that ‘love’ is used positively in a given artifact—the strategic use of the word ‘love’ is only found through individual artifact examination. The rhetor may use the term ‘love’ negatively, primarily due to rhetor experience and message purpose. The context and surrounding clues, the aforementioned “associations” (Thames, 2021), in the artifact must be used to help make such a determination; artifact analysis will show how the rhetors strategically use particular terms toward intentional meanings within their artifacts.

The Inquiry

As an important distinction, the objective in this work is to evaluate how the god term and devil term classification might well be oversimplifying the issue, particularly if terms are capable of accomplishing both extremes simultaneously. The objective in this work is not to look at whether one term could represent one extreme in one instance in an artifact and then perhaps represent another extreme in a different instance. After all, it is clear that if a rhetor is telling a story that unfolds, a characterization could change. Burke (1984) accounted for this by saying, “Insofar as schemes of motivation change, one may expect a change in the very motives which people assign to their actions” (p. 25). Since god terms and devil terms are ‘dialectical counterparts,’ then they could already be accounted for as serving different extremes of meaning in different circumstances.

In a song about a breakup, for example, the rhetor might refer to a relational partner, or the relationship itself, in an artifact positively pre-breakup and then negatively post-breakup. If the artifact is designed to tell a story of life experience dealing with the events of the breakup, the rhetor could choose to structure the artifact in such a way that earlier mentions of the relationship—pre-breakup—are god terms, while the later mentions of the relationship—post-breakup—are devil terms. In a simplistic sense, the rhetor would be crafting a message this way in order to convey to the audience how impressions of the relationship shifted.

To illustrate the point, an example of relationship impression shifting is found in the 2021 song “Driver’s License” by Olivia Rodrigo. In the song, use of the word “you” early on is a reference to her relationship partner. “You” could be a god term in this case because the lyrics suggest her partner was a source of inspiration for getting a driver’s license and learning how to drive. Additionally, her relationship partner is excited that she will eventually be able to drive up to his or her house due to having a license in hand. The license is motivation; the license is achievement, and the partner is supportive.

A bit later in the song, the usage of the word “you” is very different and could well be a devil term. The relationship is referenced as being over, with the word “you” stated in a sadder and more accusatory way. Additional context in the song shows that there is shock that the relationship partner could be so okay with the relationship having ended, including mention of driving alone past her relationship partner’s street—a direct contrast to the earlier goal of driving up to her partner’s house. The license would then be a painful memory because it is attached to the relationship; it is sadness.

This then leads to the central argument for this work of how a key term might instead exist as a god term and devil term simultaneously; the possibility of a key term, even in the exact same instance it is used, representing both an ultimate good and an ultimate evil for the rhetor at the same time. If a key term's purpose is truly to lead "those who listen in the direction of what is good" (Weaver, 1985, p. 18), is opposing meaning possible in the same term and in the same instance? Technically, it may be more likely that it is not supposed to happen when considering Burke's purpose with his terminology.

Since god terms and devil terms are representative examples of extremes of worldview for the rhetor, a term functioning as god and devil at once seems as if it would cancel out, so to speak, and become neutral and therefore not represent an extreme either way. The issue, though, is that "Burke is often oversimplified or read dualistically" (Slater, 2018, p. 98), and this is where understanding god terms and devil terms as 'dialectical counterparts,' however in the exact same instance, is an important contribution to the conversation. It is also what necessitates the analysis of an alternate term, because "at their most extreme, these unnecessary dichotomies can metaphorically suggest fallacious binaries" (Slater, 2018, p. 98). Burke's ideas may currently be evaluated in ways that are too formulaic if there is ambiguity in how meaning is meant to be both expressed and understood. In evaluating the extremes of motive and worldview, a term is supposed to show an audience a positive or negative feeling denoted by god and devil—that much is clear. A fully polarized comprehension of Burke is not entirely useful, however, if there exists some ability to address blurred meaning of symbolic expression, again through what Thames (2021) described as an effort toward "complex concordance" designed "to aid interpretation"—considering deliberate, blurred meaning can very well be meant to align with rhetor motive. Extremes of worldview certainly appear as though they can be found without necessarily requiring different terms.

This is not to propose that Burke was wrong. Instead, nuancing his argument can help with comprehension and subsequent explanation of god terms and devil terms in order to accurately perceive a push and pull of the struggle of meaning within particular, applicable terms and artifacts. For Burke, rhetoric is meant to "illustrate a world of composition and division, a world of conjunctive and disjunctive relations" (Stob, 2008, p. 139). Within this conversation, the 'conjunctive and disjunctive relations' can still conclusively be found, just as different meanings within the same term.

Part of the issue connects to how language forms meaning. There exists a rather definitive fact that "the English language is peculiarly abundant in words and phrases which are capable of two meanings" ("Double Meanings," 1871), something that directly points us to the possibility of opposing meanings instead of only opposing terms. Language in-and-of-itself is wrought with meaning beyond how words may be traditionally perceived at face value. There is also, however, the interpretive and psychological element to the rhetoric in an artifact. As put forth by Jiao, Yang, Guo, Xu, Zhang, and Jiang (2021), it "is an interesting topic...to explore whether good and evil natures represent opposite poles on a single, bipolar dimension or if these concepts are better considered as two dimensions" (p. 285). A 'single, bipolar dimension' of language analysis makes considerably more sense, rather than always looking at two entirely distinct dimensions—to qualify: at least within particular circumstances. Following Weaver's (1985) claim that "rhetorical language, or language which would persuade, must always be particularized to the situation" (p. 8), polarizing meanings within the same term in specific artifact examples will be discussed—because they indicate carefully chosen and deliberate moves on the part of the rhetor. According to how Burke is read, persuasive messaging is critically in need of context sensitive engagement, after all.

The Debate

Artifact analysis is meant to reveal organic meaning. There is a belief that "if a rhetor links a god term to the ends of her argument, the argument seems to gain veracity" (Kurlinkus, 2014, p. 52). The artifact is meant to become a clear encapsulation of rhetor worldview. Furthermore, "such words are called god terms in the first place...because they promise some fated result" (Kurlinkus, 2014, p. 57). The purpose of a god term is to illustrate an ultimate good, which is why they allow insight into rhetor

perspective. The artifact will of course seem more genuine when a rhetor is able to depict through a message what should be valued or at least what should be valued ideally.

As representations of potentially differing meanings in the same term, ‘fated results’ are context-sensitive, yes, but they extend beyond what might be evident even through the artifact as an overall, organic whole. As mentioned previously, artifacts dealing with relationships are entry points for this kind of understanding. Through an artifact, a rhetor may construct an earlier part of an artifact’s message under the belief/premise that a relationship will work out in the long run. In these kinds of cases, the relationship, as well as its corresponding terms, might be god terms within the artifact. If the relationship ends up not working, and therefore is looked at negatively, the relationship and its corresponding terms might be devil terms at a different point within the artifact. Even at this base level, however, there is a justification for looking at terms through which meaning in each individual case should be evaluated, as opposed to looking at the term and all its subsequent usage as having one, holistically motivated and organic meaning for the entire artifact.

In individual instances of term use, one should then reflect on whether relationship references can exist simultaneously as god and devil terms at the same time. In cases where “evil...is in the thing itself, an absence of the good” (Norrie, 2015, p. 452), then it might make sense to give meaning to a term as purely devil—Norrie (2015) pointed out that there is a “problem” to this “approach” of “evil” as “absence of the good” (p. 452), anyway. From a particular philosophical standpoint, evil well may be characterized as ‘absent of good,’ and there is little uncertainty to that interpretation. To say a term can only be one thing in one artifact without any level of ambiguity, however, shortchanges how language carries symbolic meaning. To the point, Burke (1969) discussed how “a perfectionist might seek to evolve terms free of ambiguity and inconsistency” (p. xviii), though such a level of perfection in language use is far from achievable. Language and symbolism, because they are ambiguous, require additional need for conversation.

Part of the condition, and even challenge, for making interpretive assessments is in looking at symbol use at all. As described by Jiang and Liao (2021), “The natural language, which is vague and ill-defined in humanistic system, is an important information expression tool for people” (Jiang & Liao, 2021, p. 207). While there is no question over the benefit of humankind using language to articulate ideas and feelings, language itself can be insufficient to convey all possible meanings at all times, as accurately as possible. This complication is further evident because “emotions, like words and symbols, are also ways of seeing the world” (Slater, 2018, p. 100). Language has its limitations and should therefore be viewed with as much room for interpretation as possible. Even for Burke, the intention was to “discover how conflicting and imperfect symbol-using creatures can move towards a better life” (Slater, 2018, p. 97). Burke was of course interested in evaluating how language can be used for self-expression and a means to discover rhetor intention. Such an evaluation, though, cannot be done without full recognition that language is incapable of capturing the entirety of rhetor mindset.

While terms are ultimately meant to indicate rhetor worldview within an artifact, terms themselves can fall short of capturing true, expressive meaning exactly as intended. Since language can sometimes be ‘ill-defined,’ despite the value it holds in self-expression, it would stand to reason that a word could therefore be a god term and a devil term at once; “persuasion is at once subversive and constructive” (Rosteck & Leff, 1989, p. 330). A rhetor may want to express conflict with or toward a desired motive. The rhetor’s purpose could then manifest itself through one term holding both extremes. Put simply: should a rhetor want to convey the dichotomy of split feelings at once, particular word choices may help in crafting a message of extreme, yet contradictory, emotion.

Drawing again on the relationship example—if a rhetor was to write a song about a valued and missed relationship after the relationship has ended, there could be a bittersweet intention on the part of the rhetor for using relationship-based terms within an artifact. The ‘fated result’ would be found within the terms used because they still hold the capacity of extreme meanings for the rhetor...though the terms could be concurrently meant to be a contradiction within themselves. A single term might represent negative emotions of sadness, frustration, and anger, while also representing good memories; nostalgia, love, and caring.

The spirit of the argument still holds true because “an ethics of rhetoric requires that ultimate terms be ultimate in some rational sense. The only way to achieve that objective is through an ordering of our own minds and our own passions” (Weaver, 1985, p. 232). Our minds are ordered to have conflicting feelings about particular circumstances—it then follows that rhetors may choose to express passionate feelings through language, directly due to their own held conflict. This is because “symbols, terms, and language form the building blocks, the bricks and mortar, of the structures of our collective life” (Stob, 2008, p. 131). Within our collective life is conflict; it is a natural step that we, as humans with language at our disposal, would use language, and crucial language within an artifact at that, to try and precisely demonstrate the kinds of conflict we have. Specific terms could be used to express passion, and yet a level of struggle or conflict, which necessitates an account of use.

Applications of Anti-Heroes/Deadpool

In order to establish a conceptual foundation for relatable struggle, conflict can also be explored in characterization. Anti-heroes have gained tremendous popularity in recent history, likely because “modernist authors used anti-heroes to confront ambiguity and shifting societal norms” (Triana, 2018, p. 1018). Dodds (2022) commented on the relevance of more nuanced plots and characters today, criticizing “clear cut good vs evil...which works well in terms of the narrative, but very much lacks the moral gradient that modern audiences have become accustomed to.” Traditionally, “the goodness (or evilness) of a person’s character determines whether he/she is likely to be helpful (or harmful) to others. In recent years, the perspective that personal perception and impressions people form of a person can have both good and evil traits has grown” (Jiao et al., 2021, p. 276). The use of characters with good and bad traits may at least partially explain the conflict of meaning within god terms and devil terms—and that one term is capable of having opposing meaning.

Characters who display both good and evil traits are much more multidimensional and therefore seem uniquely appealing to audiences—the same could be said of symbols in general. Unlike the earlier mentioned perspective of “evil” being “in the thing itself, an absence of the good” (Norrie, 2015, p. 452), for anti-heroes “the absence of evil may not indicate the presence of good in terms of personality and vice versa” (Jiao et al., 2021, p. 277). Characters such as DC’s Harley Quinn and Catwoman and Marvel’s Wolverine and Deadpool tend to resonate with audiences not because of their heroics but because they occupy a morally gray area. They themselves are character-based, symbolic representations of god terms and devil terms functioning together.

Instead of being stoic, unyielding, and dogmatic characters, they are imperfect, pushing the boundaries between being hero and villain. In application, for these characters, villainous acts do not cancel out heroics, which is the combination needed for an anti-hero; “MACs [morally ambiguous characters] often behave in immoral ways; however, they also have redeeming qualities that differentiate them from villains” (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015, p. 390). Without yet trying to make too much of a leap, terms can possibly do the same—be bad, but redeeming; devil and god. When looking at “how broader perceptions of these morally mixed character types affect not just enjoyment but also other positively valenced evaluations such as appreciation or search for meaning” (Eden, Daalmans, & Johnson, 2016, p. 351), there is at least a slight comparison to be made. If audiences do indeed value a level of ambiguity in meaning and motive, or at the very least if they are on the lookout for it, then symbolic characters may have the same kind of appeal and interpretation as symbolic language—especially when both can be so crucial for making sense of an effective artifact.

Consider ways in which audiences try to understand artifact meanings. If a rhetor has a motive and an intention toward creating a message and then filters that message through an artifact, characters and symbols/language/terms can operate in somewhat similar ways. As Burke (1989) himself claimed, the “act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker’s interests” (p. 191). Noted in this paper already, humans experience and feel conflict due to a variety of occurrences in their lives. If language, even confined within the same term, can be used to express said

conflict, then there should be a resulting level of identification on the part of the audience—which is a result of comprehending the rhetor’s struggle.

Identification

Identification is also present for characterization. It is not uncommon for “individuals [to] compare their own behaviors to those of a character in entertainment content” (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015, p. 392). Within the search for meaning encouraged by character interpretation is also self-reflection. Importantly, “heightened identification may allow viewers to like a character even when he/she is perceived as immoral” (Oliver et al., 2019, p. 170). Anti-heroes can come across as more human and more relatable compared with definitive heroes and definitive villains. Even if an anti-hero acts outside the scope of what a person may actually do in his or her own life, identification can still take place. In instances where a rhetor is using symbolic language in an artifact, the rhetor him- or herself may also act outside the scope of what a person may actually do in his or her own life; ‘heightened identification,’ however, remains a real possibility. Character, and even rhetor, motivation would be similar to motivations potentially felt by audiences, therefore creating a level of identification. The relatability afforded to anti-heroes could also be afforded to terms of conflicting meaning.

The suggestion here is that a mixed, extreme meaning-based term that simultaneously functions as a god term and a devil term be called a *Deadpool Term*. Marvel’s *Deadpool* is a popular anti-hero, and his actions and motivations make him particularly well-suited for the term label. *Deadpool* is genuinely driven by extremes of good and evil. For instance, if you compare *Deadpool* with the above-named anti-heroes, there are essential distinctions. *Harley Quinn* leans more toward being a villain because of her associations with *The Joker* and *Poison Ivy*. *Wolverine* leans more toward being a hero because of his association with *Jean Grey* and his allegiance to the *X-Men*. *Catwoman*’s association with *Batman* puts her more in the realm of a hero due to her fascination with and fixation on him. In recent history, *Catwoman* has even been depicted alongside the *Justice League*, further reinforcing her classification as a hero.

Deadpool, however, appears to act in accordance with his own agenda. At any given point in time, he is typically shown doing what best suits him. His actions reveal extremes of good and evil simply because his actions are based on self-interest—no matter how villainous or how heroic those actions might be. He has saved the day on numerous occasions but has no problem acting in a selfish manner or killing, even when unnecessary. Unlike many other anti-heroes, the only side he has really chosen is his own.

Deadpool would also not be categorized as a neutral character because of how extreme his actions are. While he may not be conflicted about what he does in the same way terms can be representative of rhetor conflict, his girlfriend does keep him grounded enough that he retains his humanity and never fully becomes a true villain. The difference between *Deadpool*, as compared to *Harley Quinn*, *Catwoman*, and *Wolverine*, is that his girlfriend is not steadfastly affiliated with the fiction and instead comes across as just a regular person; at least, in the sense that she is not a prominent character and is not important to a particular side and is not given her own plotlines. She is inconsequential compared to the likes of *The Joker*, *Poison Ivy*, *Batman*, or *Jean Grey*. As a result, *Deadpool* does not have a connection that pulls him one way or another, to good or evil only, in any kind of consistent manner.

Further to the point, as seen in the first *Deadpool* movie, “*Deadpool* was driven by revenge, as well as the desire for a woman and to return to his former, attractive, physical appearance” (Triana, 2018, p. 1017). His love life grounds him, but his desire for revenge and his desire to reverse his physical appearance are personal motivators that ensure he makes the majority of his actions out of a self-serving mentality. He purposefully embodies the good and evil extremes of anti-hero, which is why he is best suited as an entry point, as a label, to analyze terms that embody both good and evil extremes, as well. It is this uniqueness of *Deadpool*’s character that justifies the terminology of ‘*Deadpool Term*,’ as opposed to something more generalized, such as *Anti-hero Term*. *Deadpool* encompasses what it means to be a genuine anti-hero. Quite simply, *Deadpool* functions as both good and evil, as *Deadpool Terms* function

as both good and evil. They are separate and opposite meanings derived from the same thing. As Deadpool could be more relatable to audiences because he embodies conflict of meaning, Deadpool Terms and applicable rhetor motives can also be more relatable. Deadpool has personal motivators that are established through a characterization of opposing meaning, and rhetors have personal motivators that can be established through term use of opposing meaning.

God Terms and Devil Terms Instead

Finding these kinds of opposing meanings in artifacts is critical for a justification of the Deadpool Term. Aside from Deadpool himself being symbolic of the Deadpool Term, there is again an opportunity to evaluate Deadpool Terms used in relationship-message contexts. In order to adequately explain that Deadpool Terms are different from god terms and devil terms, however, a discussion of the distinction is needed. At its core, the distinction between god terms or devil terms, as opposed to a Deadpool Term classification, is predicated on whether terms are truly reaching opposing, extreme meaning. Brummett (1989) provided a foundation for this distinction when discussing god term and devil term use. The representative example given by Brummett (1989) was how “Mother Teresa may be a perfect symbol, but the real Mother Teresa is probably given to unsaintly crankiness on occasion” (p. 87). When applied to language, a god term would represent an ultimate good. If the good has elements of bad, however, it does not necessarily follow that the term has an opposing extreme of meaning and should also be classified as an ultimate evil, as a devil term. The vice versa argument would be accurate, as well, thus suggesting that artifact examples are needed to demonstrate these kinds of distinctions.

Taylor Swift’s 2007 song “Teardrops on my Guitar” contains terms that at first appear as Deadpool Terms but are truer to the meaning of devil terms. In the song, both the teardrops and the guitar seem to represent mixed emotion. Swift sings about someone named Drew who, in the context of the song, is conveyed as either an ex, now with someone else, or perhaps a friend she wishes she had been involved with romantically before he found someone else. The “teardrops” on her “guitar” are a reference to her crying when thinking about her circumstances. Though Drew still functions as a muse of sorts, inspiring her to continue singing and playing guitar, the “teardrops” and the “guitar” are in fact devil terms only. There is little in the song to suggest the teardrops are in any way tears of joy. While Drew could theoretically bring about positive emotions, convincing her to continue singing and playing guitar, the songs she creates may well still be sad or at least might function as an outlet for her sadness. Even if that is in fact the case, a slightly positive meaning added to the terms “teardrops” and “guitar” would not be enough to suggest the terms should also be considered as god terms. The extremes of meaning, necessary for Deadpool Term classification, are not present.

The 2018 song “Happier” by Marshmello and featuring Bastille presents problems with identifying Deadpool Terms, too, because it more closely resembles use of god terms. The song is about ending a relationship because it looks to be the only way to make the relationship partner happy again. The first problem that emerges in identifying Deadpool Terms within this song is that the word “happier,” which could pull in both extreme directions, is an adjective. As such, it is more useful as a description rather than a key term, which negates its classification as god or devil.

Consider the problem of accounting for extremes of meaning through the terms “I” and “you.” The rhetor accepts the fact that the relationship needs to come to an end in order for his partner to be happier. The mentioned “you,” then, would be a god term because the objective described in the song is to make “you” happier. The only real negative for the “you,” as established by the rhetor, is in keeping a dysfunctional relationship going. It is therefore difficult to justify “you” as a devil term, as well. “You” is not an evil, and the rhetor’s intention toward the mentioned “you” is positive; he seeks his partner’s happiness.

The “I” in the song is in a state of conflict, but, as the song says, “only for a minute, I want to change my mind.” When evaluated for its context, there is only a small hesitation in what “I” needs to do by ending the relationship; there is an accepted sadness. Even the relationship itself has become a source of sadness, with the rhetor sad to see it end. It would be easy to discredit the claim that “I” is both god and

devil due to such a small/minor reconsidering of the matter. Though “I” may not be a true god or devil term at all, a lack of real, meaningful conflict in what “I” needs to do denies its classification as a Deadpool Term.

Even if Deadpool Terms are rare, however, there is evidence of their existence for the purpose of using language and rhetorical strategy to achieve desired meaning and relatability. According to Slater (2018), “As strategies, [emotions] can sometimes be effective and sometimes not, but the point is to learn to enact the best strategies as often as possible” (p. 99). When needed, the Deadpool Term can capture emotion and also emotional conflict. It is a strategy to a message, and it is worth noting, even if clearly identifying Deadpool Term use presents a challenge.

Deadpool Term Artifact 1: REO Speedwagon’s “Take It on the Run” (1981)

In REO Speedwagon’s 1981 song “Take It on the Run,” the rhetor/narrator describes how his relationship partner might be cheating on him. The rhetor’s message to his partner is that he is hearing rumors of infidelity, yet he is working under the assumption those rumors are not true. The stand he takes, however, is that if the rumors are true, he has no hesitation in being done with the relationship. In this song, ‘baby’ and ‘babe’ are references to the rhetor’s partner and are Deadpool Terms. Certainly, the rhetor is suspicious of his partner based on the rumors, but he is willing to give the benefit of the doubt. ‘Baby’ and ‘babe’ are vital to the artifact’s message, and they are repeated, so they are unquestionably key terms. On one hand, the terms could be seen as devil terms—there is a sadness that comes with the prospect of the relationship ending due to cheating. Cheating itself is obviously also a source of sadness. On the other hand, though, this song is about not buying into rumors at their absolute face value. Given the benefit of the doubt, the rhetor’s partner, the “baby” and “babe,” are also given a god term status; this is the person trusted until presented with concrete evidence not to trust. Further evidence in the song demonstrates both god term and devil term extremes—“baby” gets the preferential treatment of not believing the cheating rumors are true, but if they are, it is a problem; “babe” gets referenced within the context of a denial of the cheating, but to be aware that if cheating is taking place, “babe” should just leave and is no longer welcome in the rhetor’s life.

The song “Take It on the Run” is an emotional response to a partner potentially cheating; however, the response is characterized as a logical and strategic kind of emotion—not to accept a rumor, but to send the message that, should the rumor be true, the relationship would need to immediately end. There is a push and pull of extremes because the inclination is not to believe rumors that are spread and perhaps exaggerated, especially when they are not confirmed by the relationship partner. At the same time, the thought the rumors are true crosses the rhetor’s mind with a level of suspicion—should the rumors be true, there is a direct stance that the relationship will cease.

This song demonstrates a genuine goal for Deadpool Term usage. To accomplish the aim of the message, mentions of the partner in the relationship are critical to the song’s meaning and are far from neutral. They are meant to run extremes of meaning by design. The relationship partner is held in high enough regard since the rumors are not accepted outright. The rumors, however, also trigger a level of doubt, with the rhetor in the song even pointing to some behaviors in the relationship that could, possibly, and when taken into account alongside the rumors, be an indication of cheating taking place.

Deadpool Term Artifact 2: O.A.R.’s “Shattered” (2008)

Mentions of relationship partners are not entirely necessary for finding Deadpool Terms. In the 2008 song “Shattered” by O.A.R, it is the word “car” that functions as a Deadpool Term. In the song, the rhetor is describing how he feels that change is needed, but he continually comes back to his relationship partner/the relationship by “always turn[ing] the car around.” The purpose of the song is that he needs to come to terms with the fact that the needed change is internal, within himself, as opposed to faulting the relationship and his partner for the internal problems he has. In an interview, O.A.R.’s lead singer Marc

Roberge commented on the song, saying, “It’s not about the people holding you back. It’s about you” (Ortega, 2008).

The car is a representation of what can pull him away from the relationship, but it is also the thing that he uses to return. The car is therefore a devil term in the sense that it represents a thing which provides him the capability of unjustifiably leaving the relationship—which he is inclined to do—but the car is also a god term because it is the thing he uses to come back to the relationship, as well. The word “car” is repeated throughout the song and is fundamental to the song because of what it represents.

The last line of the song is “I’ve got to turn this thing around.” The word “thing” in this case is a god term only because the rhetor has, as represented by the concluding line of the song, figured out that it is his own thinking that needs to be reevaluated; that he should stop faulting anyone else. By contrast, the word “car” is used previously in the song when he is sorting through his thought process, so it embodies a much different tactic within the message. The “car” is a Deadpool Term because of its conflict of meaning. It signifies the uncertainty that an audience is meant to comprehend on the path to realization. Without the “car” being used as a Deadpool Term in the song, the struggle would not be as obvious as the rhetor intends.

Deadpool Term Artifact 3: Kate Bush’s “Running Up That Hill” (1985)

Kate Bush’s 1985 song “Running Up That Hill” may well be the best example of Deadpool Term usage, though it does need interpretation. “Hill,” a repeated, absolutely necessary key term that establishes a vision for the song, while also being important enough to be in the song’s title, denotes a conflict of meaning because of wishful thinking. When Kate Bush describes herself as “running up that hill,” she is looking at the hill as an obstacle; a challenge. It is a tough obstacle, sure, but not an undefeatable one. According to Kate Bush herself, the song is about how, in a relationship, “if the man could be the woman and the woman the man, if they could make a deal with God, to change places, that they’d understand what it’s like to be the other person and perhaps it would clear up misunderstandings” (Eames, 2022). In a perfect world, partners in a relationship would be able to switch places with one another in order to better understand each other’s mindset, thereby being able to conquer hills, the bumps in a relationship, with virtually no effort. Kate Bush additionally said, “If we could actually swap each other’s roles, if we could actually be in each other’s place for a while, I think we’d both be very surprised!” (Eames, 2022).

Therein lies the basis for “hill” as a Deadpool Term in the song. Yes, the song sets up an impossibility of men and women switching places in order to understand one another, but the hypothetical setup does not therefore suggest hills are impossible to be conquered otherwise. It would be nice if relationship partners did not have to deal with obstacles in their relationships, but they do...the necessary evil is what creates the Deadpool Term for the song.

Given that people cannot actually switch places with one another, then a hill is otherwise only conquerable with effort. The hill is a devil term because it is this thing in the way—a thing that would be nice to not have to deal with at all. The hill is not pleasant by any stretch of the imagination, but the hill can be conquered, and conquering the hill is the only way to grow. The overall meaning in the song includes both relational and individual growth. The importance of growth and strengthening the relationship classifies “hill” as a god term, as well, which means a Deadpool Term is being used.

Again, Norrie (2015) stated that there is a “problem” to “the approach” of viewing the “evil that is in the thing itself” as an “absence of the good” (p. 452). This is why the “hill” works so well as a Deadpool Term. There is an evil to that hill, but it does not mean the hill is absent of the good. The hill, problematic and frustrating though it may be, is also representative of a way for the relationship to improve. The hill for Kate Bush is hypothetical, and she wishes it was not there, which would appear to make it a devil term only; however, she also sees the hill as conquerable with a fantastical mind switch. The way she describes “hill” in the context of the song is therefore already technically a god term. The “hill” has additional reason for god term classification, though, because Kate Bush likely does not see all relationships as doomed without said mind switch. Given that relationships can still work without partners

switching minds, so, too, is the hill not insurmountable. Relationships and individuals can grow by overcoming odds.

As evidenced through the song's context, Kate Bush is demonstrating how the "hill" plays to both extremes of god term and devil term. Use of the word "running" up the hill suggests the hill can be conquered—through the allusion of running—as a result of the mind switch. Kate Bush's lyrics are, "Be running up that road, Be running up that hill, Be running up that building." The fact that Kate Bush uses the word "building" in the song is unusual, but it allows for an interpretation of personal growth as key to relationships, too. Certainly, running up a building is a more unique and complicated line for an audience to grasp as compared to running up a road or hill.

Conquering a building gives the impression of individual success, such as within a work setting in an office building. The image created therefore leans more toward personal growth, which is important because it is still necessary to grow as an individual as a relationship grows. The sequence of lines provides concrete evidence of Kate Bush's intention for the song's message. The ordering of "road," then "hill," and then "building" indicates increasing steepness and also increasing difficulty. On one hand, this is arguably Kate Bush saying that not dealing with problems in a relationship will make them worse; on the other hand, it is arguably Kate Bush saying the "building," the really tough obstacle, requires both relational and personal growth to effectively overcome.

Though it could be argued that "road" and "building" are Deadpool Terms in the song, too, "road" falls short as a key term at all because, by association, running up a road would be relatively easy for most runners and therefore tends to avoid either extreme of god term or devil term. In addition to the mind switch, running directly up a building adds a layer of impossibility, which pulls it toward a devil term and away from being a god term—though it is nonetheless still an obstacle that would be great to overcome. If 'stairs' were used as a word in place of or along with "building," it would drastically alter the message. Running up a building, though, presents a tough visualization for the audience. It is akin to thinking of someone scaling a building. If "building" was somehow meant to be a reference to relationship building, it may have god term appeal, but that requires an interpretative move that would make the "building" more neutral. Rather than being this impossible thing to run up, the building would lose its devil term connotation.

The "hill," the portion of the relationship after the road but before the building, is a clear indication and visualization of struggle, and yet is also the thing that you can surpass with effort. Again, note that "hill" is deliberately the word used in the song title; not road or building. Running up a road does not adequately give the impression of difficulty, and running up a building is much tougher to comprehend for an audience trying to make sense of a message about overcoming obstacles. The "hill" is unmistakably volatile, which is why it makes sense for the title, and it is also why it makes sense as a valuable and purposeful Deadpool Term.

Conclusion

A revitalization of Burke's rhetoric can allow audiences to gain a level of insight into how words are intentionally used for strategic purposes. For Burke (1966), "language" is imbued with "its own particular motives" (p. 440). Outside of a conventional understanding of opposing meaning of god terms and devil terms in artifacts, Deadpool Terms are both god terms and devil terms functioning, quite deliberately, at the same time. There is clear reason to evaluate extremes of meaning existing in the same terms. There is also reason to use Burke's ideas as the basis of an ongoing conversation about symbols and symbolic language. Even if artifacts where god term and devil term dichotomies are present at the same time and in the same term are rare, in instances where they can be found, considerable analysis is needed. As part of a persuasive strategy for communicating significant and meaningful messages, rhetors can utilize opposing meanings within the same term. This tactic of language that can be referred to as a Deadpool Term. The Deadpool Term serves as one way to navigate "intractable conflict and controversy" (Brummett, 1989, p. 88), stemming from otherwise confusing interpretations. Rather than relying on the customary analysis of god term and devil term dichotomy, instead the Deadpool Term offers a unique

approach to persuasion and language use within artifacts. As opposed to relegating key terms to an ultimate good or an ultimate evil only, the Deadpool Term reveals instances of ultimate good and ultimate evil portrayals coexisting at once.

As examples, Deadpool Terms are presented in the songs “Take It on the Run,” “Shattered,” and “Running Up That Hill.” It would be beneficial in future studies to evaluate artifacts outside relationship-based songs; certainly, there is reason that characters can be symbolic of Deadpool Terms, too. For the purposes of scratching the surface, though, relationship-based songs are worthwhile choices, especially in cases where the relationship is addressed as a source of conflict. In order to even further understand and reconsider perceptions of Burke’s analysis, a range of extremes can likely be found elsewhere, too. Burke already allowed for opposing extremes of meaning found in opposing terms, so pushing the conversation further to determine extremes of opposing meaning in the same term is worthwhile. The introduction of the Deadpool Term in this work is meant to bridge the gap in the comprehension of conflicting meaning.

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